Corrected Transcript

Interview with **ROBERT ROBINSON**
Interviewed by Richard Maulsby

Rob Robinson had extensive national political organizing experience when he joined the 1978 Barry campaign. He assisted Campaign Manager Ivanhoe Donaldson as both a ward coordinator and with multiple administrative tasks. He served in the Barry administrations as Chief Administrative Officer in the Executive Office of the Mayor and chose to leave the government in 1988. Thereafter he did quantitative and qualitative research for an ad agency and ran successful campaigns for DC City Councilmembers. He ran unsuccessfully for the Council himself in 1997. He and his wife, Sherrill, are founding members of DC Solar United Neighborhoods and in 2016 re-established the DC Consumer Utility Board.

Date of interview: August 21, 2015

[Begin audio file part 1 of 2.]

INTERVIEWER: Just for starters, Rob, if you would give us your name and spell it for us.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yes. My name is Robert Robinson. And that's spelled R-o-b-e-r-t, that's the first name, Robert, and R-o-b-i-n-s-o-n is Robinson.

INTERVIEWER: Great. So just before we start talking specifically about the 1978 campaign, a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? How was it you came to Washington? Kind of general background.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Okay. I was born in western Massachusetts in a town called Pittsfield, but I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and grew up in a town called Larkspur, just across the Golden Gate Bridge, until about 1962 or '63. I moved back to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and left the country and went to school in Edinburgh for a couple of years. I went to college in Pennsylvania. I wound up in Washington, D.C.---I had worked for about 18 months in the Jimmy Carter Presidential campaign, working primary states throughout the country, and then working in the general election in Youngstown, Ohio. And I wanted to work for the Democratic National Committee but as a field organizer I didn't have a lot of political juice.

So I came to D.C., and after I got here I began falling in love with the town. I had to leave, however, to go to New Jersey to work a campaign for governor for a while, and then came back and was working briefly for the Chuck Robb for Lieutenant Governor campaign [in Virginia], while I was living here in D.C.. And then I ran into some people that I knew from Atlanta who said, "Hey, there's a wonderful guy named Marion Barry that's running for mayor. Why don't you go see about his campaign?" So I did.

INTERVIEWER: What year is this?

ROBERT ROBINSON: This is 1977, I believe. And I met Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry's 1978 campaign manager], and I was interviewed by Ivanhoe, and Anita Bonds [Deputy Campaign

Manage}, and Lorraine Whitlock [Ward 7 Coordinator], and Joe Carter, and a bunch of other people, and came on board with Ivanhoe and Anita in January of 1978.

INTERVIEWER: So right at the very beginning.

ROBERT ROBINSON: At the very, very beginning, and I'd been working with Ivanhoe prior to that time for several months. So that's how I came here, and I fell in love with Washington, D.C.

INTERVIEWER: What was Washington like? What was your impression of Washington when you first came here?

ROBERT ROBINSON: That's an excellent question, Richard. Washington, D.C., is best described—the best description I've heard of it is as a collection of small Southern towns, and I really think that's what D.C. has. It has these wonderful neighborhoods all over the city, a number of them in each ward, and they're all formed around small neighborhood business districts. So it was a terrific place. You could go from Brookland to Anacostia to Congress Heights to Deanwood and back over here to Foggy Bottom, and every neighborhood was different and specific and individual. And there were small neighborhood business districts all over the city.

It had a very lively, vibrant atmosphere. There was clearly an African feel to Washington, D.C. and one of the things that I liked about D.C., and is almost gone at this point, aside from the fact that the wonderful architecture that you find every place, is the fact that there were places in every neighborhood that you couldn't find any place so. The first place I lived in D.C. was at 1011 24th Street, right around the corner off of Washington Circle, and I could go to places like Le Gaulois French restaurant, and I could go to the Circle Theater. I could go to places in Georgetown that you wouldn't find anyplace else. I remember there was one place that had African folk art and clothing. And you could go to a place like Fahrney's Pen Store.

So in every neighborhood there were these wonderful individual commercial places that made the city a vibrant place, and those neighborhood business districts added to the vitality of the city, and, of course, they were a big small business base for D.C. So those are some of the things that I recall, but just the wonderful neighborliness and the various neighborhoods, since I was running all over the city during the campaign, were a really, really seductive thing.

INTERVIEWER: Where have you lived in the city over the years?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I lived here in Ward 2 at the time, at 1011 24th Street.

INTERVIEWER: Foggy Bottom.

ROBERT ROBINSON: In Foggy Bottom. Then I moved, for a while, to Cathedral Avenue, the 2200 block of Cathedral Avenue, just off of Connecticut Avenue. Actually, that was in Ward I at the time. Then I moved to 719 11th Street N.E., in Ward 6, right at 11th and H Street N.E. From there I moved to 522 14th Street S.E., just off of Pennsylvania Avenue S.E. And I currently live at 1631 Newton Street in Ward 1. So I've bounced around.

INTERVIEWER: Had you done anything in terms of local politics before you met Ivanhoe Donaldson, Anita Bonds, and the people associated with--

ROBERT ROBINSON: Not in Washington, D.C. As I said, I came off of the Carter presidential, an 18-month stint, going all over the country, organizing for primary campaigns and then general election for President.

INTERVIEWER: When did you first meet Marion and what were your impressions?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I met Marion only after I'd had several discussions with Ivanhoe and interviewed other people, and the thing that I liked about Marion was that he had a terrific sense of humor, he spoke to me as if he was interested in me, and obviously he was because I was going to be involved in his campaign, but there was a real personal magnetism about Marion, a warmth. He was a very folksy person. But he obviously had a very, very engaged and inquiring mind. He asked lots of questions about who I was, what I wanted, what did I think about D.C., and he had a wonderful way of taking people into his confidence, people that he didn't know, when he was talking about even simple things.

INTERVIEWER: So the first time you met him was basically sort of the final interview for a paid staff position.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Right. The holy water, or the oil—I'd been anointed at that point by Ivanhoe, Anita Bonds, Joe Carter, Lorraine Whitlock, and a variety of people, so I had run the gauntlet.

INTERVIEWER: What were you hired to do, initially?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Well, I was sort of a deputy to Ivanhoe and I was responsible initially for coordinating, getting things organized in Wards 1, 2, 6, and 8. I did that and during the campaign, after we moved the offices to the old Miller's Fur Store, in the 1200 block of G Street N.W., Ivanhoe began using me to basically—when the air conditioning system or the elevators broke down, or when the city was going to close the building down for some reason, I would run out and sort of do business management jobs, to try to keep the campaign mechanism working. At one point I helped Jim Gibson's wife, Cathy, track the incoming campaign receipts, the contribution receipts.

So Ivanhoe used me a little bit as—he called me a business manager. I was doing a lot of campaign organizing at the same time in 1, 2, 6, and 8.

INTERVIEWER: Who was Jim Gibson, by the way?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Jim Gibson—how can I say this? Jim Gibson later became an Assistant City Administrator for Planning and Development. He worked, I believe, with the Rockefeller Foundation [after leaving the Barry administration]. He and his brother, John, were from a well-known family in Washington, D.C., as I recall. He was very politically active but he was also very, very involved with the foundation, the academic world.

INTERVIEWER: What did he do in the campaign? Did he have a designated role?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Jim was an advisor. He was very politically connected, so he worked as an advisor to Marion and to Ivanhoe. His wife, Cathy, was involved, as I said, in the campaign finance, keeping the records, and doing reports, in large part. But he was primarily an advisor.

INTERVIEWER: Were you part of an inner circle that met on a regular basis to plan strategy in your position? In some of the other interviews I've done it's clear there's a very strong

influence of people who were involved with Marion in SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee], and it was that small, kind of core group of people. But just to get a sense of—I mean, it wasn't just one small group of people. There were people like yourself who came to the campaign from the outside and were welcomed as part of it?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I was not part of the—there was something called it wasn't a coordinating committee—it was called a steering committee, as I recall, and I didn't work with the steering committee so much. I was new to Washington, D.C., but I had done a lot of campaign organizing. I answered directly, and worked a great deal with Ivanhoe, primarily, for a lot of things, but I was not a member of the steering committee. I just wasn't that connected at the time to the Washington political circles.

INTERVIEWER: Who introduced you to Ivanhoe? How did you get on Ivanhoe's radar?

ROBERT ROBINSON: When I wrote a letter and called and said I'm interested in the campaign, and took the letter down to Marion's office, on the west wing of the floor of the District Building, I wound up having a meeting with Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe was very much, at the time, Marion's alter ego. They were, I wouldn't say inseparable because they were very, very different personalities. But Ivanhoe and Marion worked hand-in-glove all of the time during the campaign, and for some years thereafter.

INTERVIEWER: What about Anita Bonds?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I spent a great deal of time with Anita Bonds. She was one of my first campaign friends. I remember Anita Bonds' circle of lady friends at the time, that I also spent a lot of time with—she lived off of M Street in Southwest D.C.—Ellen Davis and Rosealyce Sims and Pat Ballard. And so I spent a great deal of time with Anita, and I spent more time socially with Anita in the early part of the campaign than I did with other people. So, yes, I worked very closely with her. She helped me meet people. I remember going to a very early meeting in Ward 7, and I began to meet some of the circle of Lorraine Whitlock's friends.

INTERVIEWER: So you were paid staff. How many paid staff were there, initially, in the campaign, and do you have any sense of the number of volunteers that were involved?

ROBERT ROBINSON: The number of volunteer, I would say from the beginning we had a card file of the active volunteers, that were actually active was something around 100 names. There were maybe four or five paid staff to begin with. People like Betty King [in charge of special events fundraising] came in very early, and one of the things that was great about Marion's campaign is that because Betty and Ann Kinney [staff for the Finance Committee] and other people were there organizing events, a lot of the money came in not from huge donors, purely, but from parties. Betty organized parties better than anyone else I've ever seen before or since.

And so there were a lot of events all over the city, that raised money at all different levels. So it was really a grassroots fundraising effort. But the initial base of volunteers was about 100, and then one of the initial jobs that I had in Wards 1, 2, 6, and 8, was to create a card file of people, just speak to everybody I could, to get every name I could, and then to begin to identify people that were supportive of Marion and to try to bring them into some form of activism with the different ward campaign organizations.

So it began with a relatively healthy number of active volunteers. It was at least 100 names and it grew within a couple of month to probably 1,000.

INTERVIEWER: In the course of the 9 months of the primary campaign, did your job evolve? Did you take on different responsibilities or did you continue to be doing essentially the field—

ROBERT ROBINSON: I spent more time in Ward 6 and Ward 8, and less time in Ward 1 and Ward 2.

INTERVIEWER: Why would that have been?

ROBERT ROBINSON: In large part because I was also doing a great deal of work at the campaign headquarters for Ivanhoe, business activities, managing tasks that needed to be taken care of.

INTERVIEWER: You were sort of his right-hand guy.

ROBERT ROBINSON: In a way, yes. I was learning from Ivanhoe his style. I mean, I was not from the inner circle but I was learning to work with people in the inner circle, and who they were, and I was someone that could be trusted.

INTERVIEWER: Describe Ivanhoe's style.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Ivanhoe was the most charismatic, and probably the most brilliant person I've ever worked for. He was very incisive. He could analyze things in a minute and he was very good at motivating people, both by giving them direct orders and by explaining to them why what he was telling them made sense, and other things that they might want to do had a lower priority. So while he could be very intimidating and while he could be very direct, some people would say abusive, he understood exactly what needed to be done and he was capable of breaking it down for people very, very simply, and that motivated people. They knew what they needed to do. They knew what the goals were. They were not unclear about what he wanted from them. He was a magnificent general. I mean, he could have taken over the world, if that was his notion.

INTERVIEWER: You've already noted that Marion and Ivanhoe were alter egos, to some respect, but very different people. How would you contrast Marion's style—

[Interruption: Cell phone rings.]

[Begin audio file part 2 of 2.]

ROBERT ROBINSON: A good example, one of the first things that I began doing with Marion—

INTERVIEWER: Good example of what?

ROBERT ROBINSON: An example of his personal style, was involved with some of the campaign work that I did with Marion, which was taking him on walk-throughs in some of the small neighborhood business districts that were, of course, close to residential areas. So places like Mount Pleasant Street, Adams Morgan, Columbia Road in Adams Morgan. The first one was on U Street, but we also got over to Barracks Row on Capitol Hill, and Pennsylvania Avenue, Good Hope Road, Minnesota Avenue in Wards 7 and 8, and Martin Luther King down throughout Ward 8.

But the first walk-through that we did in a neighborhood business district was on U Street, the 13th, 14th areas around U Street, and the first place Marion gravitated to was Duke's Shoeshine Stand, which is now located in the Reeves Building at 14th and U, but it was originally at 13th and U. And the wonderful thing about Marion, as a candidate and a campaigner, was he literally could not take a step without meeting people that he knew. So as he was walking down U Street, horns would be honking, people would be pulling over, yelling at him out the window. He would constantly run into people that had worked at Pride [organization Barry ran which trained and found work for young African-Americans in DC], that owed him their live for getting them jobs, and so on and so forth.

So the wonderful thing was that Marion just would walk down the street and know everyone. And what we would do is we would identify volunteers, people that were going to do events, a meet-and-greet for him or something like that. But Marion just loved to talk to people. I've worked with many politicians, before and after, that want to be loved by people but they don't really like people. Marion really liked people, he knew them, and it seemed like he knew everyone. And then as he was talking to them he would be telling me about how he knew them, and what he had done with them, and Pride, and about their family. So he was so at ease with people and so interested in them, that you could walk half a block and you'd have a crowd of 10 or 15 people that were building up around Marion, and then kids would start following and stuff like that.

There is still a photograph from the first walk-through that we did on U Street. It was actually before he announced his candidacy, which he announced at Kingsman School, which was right across where he lived at 1236 E Street, N.E., in Ward 6. But this was before he actually had the campaign announcement. And there is still a photograph of that day, at Duke's Shoe Parlor in the Reeves Building today, and Marion has got the same leisure suit. He had a whole rack of '70s leisure suits that he wore. That was another thing that Ivanhoe would argue with him about.

So we spent a lot of time walking through the neighborhood business districts—8th Street, N.E., a lot of Good Hope Road and Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue, Minnesota Avenue—and I just met everyone in the city with Marion. It was unbelievable and it made me at ease, although I stuck out like a sore thumb, in most cases, because I was a white boy. My hair was a little bit long, still then. But it didn't bother Marion. So I fell in with it. It was wonderful. But he had such an obvious affection for people that they felt that, and one of the reasons that they trusted and loved him was because he was genuinely interested in them, and it was visible. You could feel it, and it made that come back from people to him.

I've never seen that in anyone, in his interpersonal skills in working with people. I've seen people from the business community that were waiting to have a meeting with him, that were calling him seven kinds of motherfuckers and stuff like that, and when they would come out of Marion's office they would be laughing and joking, Marion would have his arms around the people, and they would be loving it. They would just be soaking up the attention. At his best, I've never seen anyone with interpersonal skills like that, never—it was amazing—because he genuinely was interested and cared about people.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the announcement of the campaign. When was that? When did he actually announce, and why did he choose that particular location for the announcement?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Because it was, literally, across the street from his home at the time. Kingsman School—it's probably a charter school now; I think it's a charter school—he lived at 1236 E Street, right off of Maryland Avenue, N.E., and Kingsman is right at the corner of 13th and E. It's an elementary school—it was a good D.C. elementary school. And so he decided that he should have the announcement in his neighborhood where he actually lived, and that's what he did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember when the formal announcement was?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I want to say that it was in January of 1979.

INTERVIEWER: January of '78.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Excuse me. Yes, '78. Thank you so much. I think it was in January. I don't think it was earlier. I mean, we were doing a campaign where he began doing walk-throughs earlier than that, but I believe that it was in January at Kingsman Elementary.

INTERVIEWER: At that time, in January, at the beginning of the campaign, and literally you're new, had you paid much attention at all to politics in the city? You hadn't voted in the city before?

ROBERT ROBINSON: No, well, I was registered to vote but there hadn't been any elections. But in order to feed myself, as I said, I had to go to New Jersey for several months for a gubernatorial campaign which went south. I was organizing in Essex County and Newark, and then I was working across the river [in Virginia] with Chuck Robb, doing some campaign filing work. So I really hadn't been involved. I first met a guy named Robert Charles, Bob Charles, who's a Ward 2 activist that's been around for some time here in the Foggy Bottom area. And Bob had a house and I was renting space from him, in his house at 1011 24th Street, N.W.

INTERVIEWER: So what did you think Marion's chances were at that point? Did you think you'd signed on for a winning campaign?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I've never had any question. Marion's presence was so compelling, and Ivanhoe's campaign acumen was just overwhelming, that there really couldn't be any doubt that he would succeed. And I guess the phrase that I remember, that creates that contrast, is that when Marion was talking about the incumbents he would talk about the stumbling and bumbling of the other people and contrast that to his own decisiveness and the way the campaign was run. The campaign was run wonderfully.

Marion came here after he had been the President of SNCC and was organizing, and then he started Pride Incorporated, that was a job training business. So he was not simply running to represent poor people—obviously that was his first priority and his love—but he had reached out to the gay and lesbian community, he reached out to wealthy people in Upper Northwest, the people that ran businesses, the Giant Foods, Max Berry, who was the finance chairman was part of the Giant Food family. So he made a point of identifying every conceivable sector that you could think of and going after them.

Now, the incumbents probably were more solid with, for example, the preachers and stuff like that, and Marion was thought to be a bit of somebody from the street with too many street smarts, but Marion was not giving up any constituency. So there was never any doubt. There was never any doubt.

INTERVIEWER: In your mind, that he was going to win.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Not in my mind. Not in the mind of anyone in the campaign, and we were all working as hard as we could, and we didn't see anybody else out there that was really doing that much. We could see a little bit, but there was not visible evidence. You couldn't see the [City Council Chairman] Sterling Tucker or the [incumbent Mayor] Walter Washington campaigns pounding the streets, knocking on doors, calling people on the telephone until 12:00 at night. And the parties all over the city.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back, what do you see as the key moments of that campaign? The candidates' attributes aside, I mean, what events occurred, how responding to those events that ultimately led to his winning in the September primary?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I don't suppose you could call it—well, the one event that sticks out in my mind, and I think this was probably orchestrated by the *Washington Post*, in part, was that I think Sterling Tucker invited Marion to a meeting and tried to convince him that if he got out they could beat Walter Washington, and there was a great deal of controversy about whether he should go to the meeting. What happened was he went to the meeting and then Ivanhoe immediately went to the press and said "they're trying to push us out of the race," and made it look like the big, bad incumbents that were in the District Building were trying to push the upstart populist candidate out of the campaign. And it stuck in people's craw. They didn't like it.

So I would think that that was probably the moment that struck people in the media the most. I think, for me as a political hack, it was the fact of Marion's campaign organization, the ability for them to do house parties, you know, Betty King and Ann Kinney's fundraising with Max [Barry]. Marion had a campaign organization that—I mean, unless you were in a coma, you would not want to be associated with any campaign other than Marion's. You just wouldn't.

INTERVIEWER: What about voter registration? Who ran that? What was the philosophy in regard to that?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Well, for everybody that was doing field work in one of the wards, or if you were a precinct coordinator, you know, there are deadlines by which voter registration. So any time you did something up to a point, in addition to the campaign material which you had or you didn't have, or you were trying to make up, you would have a stack of voter registration cards that you would circulate at every meeting—if you're not registered, please register. And in many of the neighborhoods in Ward 2 and Ward 1 and Ward 6, where you've got a lot of transient people coming in and going out, like on Capitol Hill or in Adams Morgan, you would have an event. I remember there was a wonderful event at the Ontario apartment building, which is an old, elegant apartment building right off of Columbia Road, and there were a number of people that were there that weren't registered. And so what we did was we got the

cards back and registered them to vote, and we took the cards, literally, and then copied them and mailed them in.

So it was a key part of the campaign, but there were a lot of key parts. One was to have more meetings to get people to do other things, to get people to volunteer to host events.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do on Election Day?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Election Day. I was getting food to a number of precincts in Wards 6 and 8 and 1, I believe. I can't remember too much about Election Day.

INTERVIEWER: What about Election Night?

ROBERT ROBINSON: You know I don't recall Election Night. I mean, I spent a lot of the time between the wards and the campaign office. I recall that we were in the campaign office until about ten o'clock, and then I think we went to the Washington—

INTERVIEWER: Harambee House.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Oh, the Harambee House. Right. How could I forget? We also had a birthday party for Ivanhoe at the Harambee House. But I think by the time we got to the Harambee House, we felt that we had it in the bag, but there was just so much work leading up to Election Day, but it was organized. I mean, we didn't have enough people, we didn't have enough money, but we had a plan and we had dedicated volunteers, and we had the best candidate.

INTERVIEWER: So what was it like? There was a general election campaign.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yeah. Everyone was very worried about—what was his name?—Arthur—

INTERVIEWER: Fletcher.

ROBERT ROBINSON: —Fletcher, that the people—you know, there was always the discussion that a number of people, particularly in the black community, felt that Marion was too street, that he wasn't ready for it. And, of course, there were important people in Congress, particularly in the Republican Party, that hated Marion Barry. So it was important for the campaign to send the message not to let people get lazy, to make sure that they came out to vote, because there was concern that the disenchanted people from Walter Washington and Sterling Tucker's groups, or John Ray's group, would vote against Marion and Fletcher would, in some kind of way, destabilize him.

So we were very aggressive in the general election, but there was no need to worry, because the public was convinced. Marion had won the public over. He never convinced the people that hated him to like him, but he did convince most of the people that he was going to do a better job as mayor.

INTERVIEWER: Did your role change during the general election campaign?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I got more involved—you know, we had to set up of the transition, so by the time the general election had rolled around, I was spending probably 70 or 80 percent of my time working with Ivanhoe, getting ready for the transition, getting the space, getting everything organized.

INTERVIEWER: So your role in the transition was similar to what you'd been doing in the campaign. You were sort of a troubleshooter, particularly for Ivanhoe, and business management.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Making things happen.

INTERVIEWER: Making things happen.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yeah, following through. If they made commitments, something had to happen. They didn't want to have to worry about whether or not it worked out. And so I spent a lot of time following through for them.

INTERVIEWER: And then did you join the administration in January, once he was inaugurated?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So you there at the very beginning of the administration.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Right, yeah, and again, my job then became being the business manager or the chief administrative officer, but I remained involved in community affairs and I did a lot of work—for example, we came up with a plan to preserve Eastern Market. We got some parks done in Ward 6. I worked on a big dispute about the Anthony Bowen YMCA.

INTERVIEWER: I mean would you describe yourself as sort of a lifetime political junkie? You've continue to be involved in campaigns.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yeah. I guess as I've grown older I'm more concerned about the community and the ability of the community to get the things that it needs from the political infrastructure. The money has become such a factor in politics now, and one of the things I liked about Marion, always, as a mayor and you could see it in him when he was a councilmember, was he was interested and concerned about the management of government, what was going on, how was it being managed, why were things working or not working, what needed to be done. Now you see that the people who represent us are very uninterested in the way the world works, that they're there to manage, and that's a scary thing.

So I guess I'm more concerned about community, activism that helps communities get what they want. My wife and I have been solar activists, so we're trying to open access to renewable energy to everybody in the city, and we've gotten laws passed to do that.

INTERVIEWER: How many campaigns have you worked in, over your life?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Probably 15 or 20.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any the compared to the 1978 campaign?

ROBERT ROBINSON: No. No. Nothing like that.

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

ROBERT ROBINSON: There was something about the time. I mean, there was really something—the stars were aligned, as Shakespeare would say. There was something magical. The basketball team was winning, Parliament Funkadelic were breaking everything down, the road march was "One Nation Under a Groove," and that's really the way that you felt when you were out working in the campaign. Everything just seemed to be aligned, and there was this

tremendous energy and hopefulness. The community was more hopeful, was more united across the dividing lines than it's ever been, and that's what Marion wanted. And I guess the sad thing is that some parts of that failed.

INTERVIEWER: How, in your view, was the city different starting in 1979 and today than it would have been had Sterling Tucker been elected, or Walter Washington been elected? What difference did Barry's campaign and being elected—what difference, in your view, did it make in the city?

ROBERT ROBINSON: The first thing that Marion's administration, or the thing that Marion's administration did, in my view, was they reorganized and managed the finances and took what had been a government under the commissioner system, that was dominated by appointees from Congress. So, you know, the cousins of Congressmen from State X would be running the Department of Finance and Revenue, whether or not they had the qualifications for it. And then the fledgling home rule charter government was new. There really had not been elected offices before. People couldn't vote in D.C. until '63.

What Marion did was took the finances and the organization of the government and attempted to make it the best that it could be. And so the Congress dictated a financial management system, so we were struggling very, very hard to make that work. Gladys Mack, who was Marion's budget officer and part of the cabinet that included a number of women, did a terrific job of getting the District of Columbia's budgets to be readable, to make sense, and I had to work with that. I was not a good budgeteer, but I worked very hard at it. And the city got good. Its bond ratings were good. Its ratings by Wall Street, Standard & Poor's, and so on and so forth. Al Hill was a fantastic chief financial officer. He reorganized the government and made it work for people, and it did work for a while. Now, it lost its way after a while, but I don't think that anyone else would have been able to get the district government, their finances and the management of the agencies, under control and create clear policies for things like economic development and regulation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still stay in touch with people that you met in the '78 campaign?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I do as much as I can. You know, I run into Kwame Holman [assistant to Barry during the campaign]. Kwame and I were kind of running buddies during the campaign. We'd run around at night and hang out, go to clubs and stuff like that. So I see a number of people. My wife and I religiously recycle on Saturdays at Fort Totten, so I periodically run into Sybil Hammond [Barry's scheduler] and [her husband] Hampton Cross. We have dinner with them periodically. So I maintain touch with as many of the people as I can, but, you know, it's difficult.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back to Marion for a moment and your relationship with him. Did you interact with him on a daily basis during the campaign?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Oh yes, yes, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned before we started recording our conversation today that you had a lot of great Marion stories.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Oh yeah. I've got to tell you one. This is about the relationship between Ivanhoe and Marion. I was home late one night, and what I would do when I would get home, I

would make calls until about ten o'clock to round out my card file on activists and where people were, and then Ivanhoe would periodically call me and we'd talk about who was where. So I'd talk about, you know, “I just met with John Kinard" who started the Anacostia Museum, lived in Anacostia in Ward 6 at the time. So I'd be going over who I'd spoken to, and Ivanhoe and I were on the phone talking about this and all of a sudden there was a click and Marion said, "Hey, Robinson, what's going on? I'm out here on Benning Road." And Ivanhoe was like, "Man, what the hell you doing? How did you get on the phone?" He said, "I don't know. I've got this phone in my car." And so Ivanhoe says, "Man, how could you break in on a call like this? How in the hell does that happen? What the hell is going on?"

And so they went at it for about 10 minutes and Ivanhoe was trying to figure out how on Earth Marion—he said, "Did you tell them it was an emergency or something like that?"

So that was a terrifically funny story. Ivanhoe could never figure out how Marion managed to break into that call that we had.

Marion developed, I think, diverticulitis at one point in the Mayor's Office, and somebody told him that he should start juicing. So there was a lovely lady that worked with us named Doris Lockhart that worked for the Department of General Services, that worked cleaning the building and stuff like that, and we got her detailed to juice for Marion. And so she was supposed to be making juice, and she'd come back and say, "Mr. Robinson, I can't get him to drink this juice, so what am I supposed to do?" I said, "Well, just keep making it." She said, "Well, I want you to come over here in the kitchen and see something." So I went over to the kitchen. She opened the cupboard and rather than all these vegetables and stuff Marion had stocked about 80 cans of Vienna sausages, which he loved to eat. So he was supposed to be eating this healthy food and he put his favorite junk food in there.

I know at one point Marion was famous because whenever Marion went out to an event, he'd stay there and talk to people. So by the end of the day, Marion would be like an hour and a half late, so his lateness at events became legendary, and people got a little bit irritated about it. But I remember at one point, when he was struggling with his diverticulitis, and he'd been home, he actually went home and rested for a little bit at one point. But he had a meeting at Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church at 5th and I Street, Father James West, and he was supposed to meet a bunch of preachers there.

Now, what we didn't know was that Marion actually had gotten to the church before everyone but he was tired and he laid out in one of the pews and fell asleep. So the preachers were all in one time, waiting there, and they were all groaning about, "Where the hell is Marion Barry? Why do we have to wait? It's 20 minutes later." All of a sudden Marion woke up, popped up out of one of the pews, and said, "Why did it take y'all so long to get here? I've been waiting for you all afternoon."

I could go on and on.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, go on and on. Right.

In terms of things that have happened in your life, where does that whole experience of the '78 campaign fit?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Oh, it was the most exciting period of my life. I mean, you know, when I went out of the country to go to school, that was exciting because I got to travel and see things that I never thought I would see. But I think in terms of being someplace at the right time—and the other thing that was exciting for me is that I'd read a lot about the Civil Rights Movement, but I never imagined I would meet people like Marion and Ivanhoe, Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, Karen Spellman, you know, and other people. I met Larry Neal, the poet and writer who was in charge of the Commission on the Arts and Humanities Commission. I'd been reading his work for years.

So I was able to interact with people that I never thought I would have the chance to meet, and it did change my life. I mean, it really did. So no experience can change that. It got very difficult and I left the Mayor's Office when there was all this conflict going on, and I got prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office and the FBI because they were convinced that I could put Marion away, and I didn't have any knowledge of any criminal activity. So they prosecuted me because I had made an expenditure to pay a personal debt of his, and then I put the money back, but technically that meant that I had stolen money, and so I got prosecuted. So I left and I became—the view of the administration was that I was a rogue employee, so that was a sad period to see what happened.

But I have to say that that's probably the most exciting period of my life, and I think about it every day. I mean, I can't go anyplace in D.C. and remember something that happened on H Street N.E. at Family Liquors or something like that, trying to get votes. I can't go anyplace without being reminded of all of those things.

One of the funny stories, and I write about it, is that after Marion was elected, the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Barnum & Bailey Circus comes to town, and I think it's like in December or January, and they have a parade from Eckington, which is where the FedEx satellite and the satellite businesses, radio. And there's a parade that goes down H Street and across 17th Street to the Stadium Armory. And Ringling Brothers had asked Marion to participate in the parade, and ride an elephant, and he didn't do that. But he didn't want to say no so he told me to ride the elephant. So I wound up riding this elephant in the parade, down H Street, and all these brothers were running out of the stores going [makes Tarzan-like yelling sound]. I felt like the biggest fool in the world, except it was tremendously funny.

INTERVIEWER: You rode this elephant?

ROBERT ROBINSON: I rode the elephant. I thought I was going to die of the abrasions to my posterior.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any pictures of that?

ROBERT ROBINSON: There was a picture that I think the *Star* took. I've tried to find it. I didn't take it. When I left I did not get that picture out of the files, but I think the *Star* took a picture. One of the newspapers took a picture of it.

But it was a wonderful time, and the people were wonderful. I mean, having discussions with someone like Courtland Cox or Charlie Cobb is something that you couldn't buy experiences like that. The perceptions of the people from SNCC were just amazing.

INTERVIEWER: When was the last time you saw Marion?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Well, I saw Marion a lot when he was on the Council, right up until he died, because we were constantly going in and lobbying for solar legislation. So I would go in there and not beat him up but I would take my wife. We were beating the halls of the Council and trying to convince him why these things were good, and he said it was a great idea. He was always very receptive. And sometimes he'd just bring me back into his office and start talking about, you know, war stories, the good old days, when we were young and easy under the apple boughs, as Dylan Thomas would say.

INTERVIEWER: Very good. Anything else you want to say or add?

ROBERT ROBINSON: Not that I can think of, Richard. I mean, I really enjoyed doing this and I'll send you some of the other stories that I've put on paper. It was a terrific time. I'm glad that you're doing this project, and I just wish that we could find ways to imbue other campaigns and other politicians with the spirit of really making something happen for people, and the caring that was really there. The caring is what was terrific. I've never been able to put down the intense sense of caring and the desire to do things for the community that need to be done, that no one else is willing to do, and those things came directly from my experience with Marion and Ivanhoe. It's not that I didn't want to do it, but they showed me that it really can be done. And so I'm grateful, very, very grateful. I wish a lot of the things hadn't happened that did, but you can't—

INTERVIEWER: At the end of the day, it's a wonderful memory.

ROBERT ROBINSON: It's a wonderful memory. I just wish there were some way to institutionalize some of those things. I'm sure we all feel that. I'm sure we all feel that.

Thank you, Richard. Thank you very much.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.